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ABSTRACT

The effects of instructional variations during a role playing assessment on the assertive behavior of untrained, low assertive college students were investigated. Based on the responses of 1,392 students, 80 students who indicated a moderate to severe problem in refusing requests, and expressed interest in an assertion training workshop, were randomly assigned to one of eight assessment groups in a 2x2x2 factorial design. The instructions varied on three factors--knowledge of type of assertive behavior under study x knowledge of criteria for effective behavior x instructions on how to act (normally vs. effectively). Results indicated that Factor 1 affected pulse and self-reported anxiety; Factor 2 affected response latency and duration; and Factor 3 affected a posttest self-report measure of refusal behavior. Content was not affected. Implications for subject selection, training procedures, and the assessment of effects of training are discussed. (Author)

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Effects of Role Playing Instructions on
Assertive Behavior: A Methodological Study

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Running head: Instructional Variations in the Assessment
of Assertion

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Effects of Role Playing Instructions on
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Increasing attention (e.g. Nay, 1977) has been focused on the implications of assessment in behavior therapy research. For example, it has become clear in research on small animal phobias (Lick & Unger, 1977) that methodological variations in assessment instructions can affect the behavior being assessed and that such effects have implications for initial subject selection and for measuring change in outcome research. Although it seems likely that such variations also would affect assertive behavior, methodological studies are encountered infrequently in the assertion literature. In fact there are relatively few such studies (e.g. Galassi & Galassi, 1976; Nietzel & Bernstein, 1976) and, to date, the effects of methodological influences on the assessment of assertion are largely unknown.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effects of instructional variations during role playing assessment on the behavior of untrained, low assertive subjects. Role playing constitutes the mainstay of behavioral assessment in assertion research, and this study is important for several reasons. First, a survey of the literature (Westefeld, 1978) indicated that the instructions used in the major programmatic investigations of assertion (e.g. Eisler; Galassi; Hersen; McFall) vary along a variety of dimensions and suggested that these variations may make it difficult to compare the results obtained across studies. Specifically, differences in instructions during selection or pretest role

playing may lead to differences in subject selection or differences in subject performance across studies prior to training. It seems important, therefore, to determine the effects of various instructions and specifically which kinds of instructions maximize assertive performance by untrained subjects. Such information would be helpful for researchers and practitioners who are screening subjects for assertion training. It would assist them to differentiate between subjects who have severe or clinically relevant deficits in assertive behavior from those whose deficiencies are milder or more analogue in nature. The importance of studying individuals who are representative of the client population to which an investigator wants to generalize is a topic of current (Little, Curran, & Gilbert, 1977; Royce & Arkowitz, 1977) and continuing importance.

Similarly, differences in instructions following treatment may lead to different or noncomparable demands for performance across studies in trained and untrained subjects. Following treatment, trained subjects may differ from untrained subjects not only because of their training but also because they are more knowledgeable about what is being studied. If the effect of variations in assessment instructions on a subject's behavior can be determined, then future studies can yield a better appreciation of the extent to which treatment (assertion training) produces meaningful behavior change over and above that which is possible from more specific knowledge of the assessment task.

In this study, instructions were varied along three dimensions: whether subjects were informed that the role playing situations required refusal responses or not; whether subjects were informed about the char-

acteristics of an effective refusal response; and whether subjects were told to act as they normally would or as effectively as they could during role playing. These particular instructional variations were chosen for a variety of reasons. It was expected that providing subjects with the maximum amount of information--that the situations required refusal responses, the characteristics of an effective response, and instructions to act effectively--should lead to the maximum performance of which subjects are capable (cf. Wallace, 1966).

In its own right, the act normally vs. act effectively factor provides potential information about the implicit demands for effective or assertive performance in assertion research. Instructions about the situation per se can indicate the extent to which subjects' behavior is influenced by prior situational knowledge. Finally, instructions about the characteristics of an effective response provides us with information about which verbal, nonverbal, and paralanguage components of assertive behavior are in the subjects' repertoires, or which the subjects can simulate, and which they can not.

Because past research provided little basis for specific predictions, the majority of hypotheses in the study were nondirectional. The only directional predictions were that subjects receiving knowledge of the criteria for effective behavior would have shorter response latencies and durations and lower SUDS than those not possessing such knowledge and that subjects having knowledge of the type of situations would display more assertive content than subjects unaware of the situations to be role

played. There were no specific predictions for the how to act factor. In general, the authors were more concerned with uncovering the effects of instructional variations rather than gaining support for any particular instructional set.

Method

Subjects

A total of 1,392 students enrolled in a variety of courses at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill completed the Conflict Resolution Inventory (CRI), a self-report measure of refusal behavior (McFall & Lillesand, 1971). Those students who rated themselves on the CRI as having a moderate or greater problem saying "no" to unreasonable requests (50 or more on a 100-point scale); who earned a higher nonassertion score than assertion score on the CRI; and who expressed interest in an assertion training workshop were asked to participate in the study. Eighty students (32 males and 48 females) who met all three criteria were assigned randomly by sex to one of eight assessment groups (4 males and 6 females per group). It was not possible to include an equal number of males and females as proportionately more females than males met all three criteria.

Experimental Conditions

The eight assessment groups differed in the types of role playing instructions which they received. The instructions varied on three factors in a 2x2x2 factorial design. The first factor was varied according to whether participants were told the type of situations they would be role playing.

Half the subjects were informed that "You will be role playing eight situations in which another person makes a somewhat unreasonable request of you that you will probably want to refuse". The other half of the subjects were not given any information about the type of assertiveness being tapped. They were told: "You will be role playing eight everyday situations in which you are interacting with another person".

Concerning the second factor, half of the subjects were told the criteria for effective behavior, whereas the other half were given no criteria information. Thus, subjects given the criteria were told that "People who respond effectively in these situations remain as relaxed as possible, do not hesitate unnecessarily before responding and respond directly and without making excuses or compromises (that is they don't beat around the bush)".

The final instructions (factor three) that the subjects received prior to role playing concerned how they were to act in the role playing situations. Half of the subjects were told: "We are very interested in your reacting naturally to these situations. For this reason, it is important that you respond the way you normally would if the situation were actually happening to you". The other half were told: "We are very interested in your reacting as effectively as possible to these situations. For this reason, it is important that you respond as effectively as you could if the situation were actually happening to you".

Procedures

Two experimental assistants, blind to the experimental hypotheses, conducted the study. Upon arrival, the subject was directed to a waiting room and given a brief handout about the procedures and the Subjective

Unit of Disturbance Scale (SUDS). After reading the handout and asking questions, the participant's pulse was taken. The participant then proceeded to the experimental room where instructions according to group assignment were given by a taped narrator. Each subject role played eight short refusal situations based on the work of McFall & Lillesand (1971). The first refusal situation was for practice purposes only. Each taped situation consisted of a description, a line of dialogue delivered by a same-sexed confederate, and a bell which signaled the subject to respond. Following each role play situation, each subject reported a SUDS score. After the second and last role play, the subject's pulse (pulse 2 and pulse 3) was taken.

Finally, the CRI was readministered in a separate room. After the assessment procedures were completed, the experimental assistant checked with the subject concerning the scheduled time for the assertion training workshop. The subjects then reported back at the scheduled times for a two-hour workshop which consisted of bibliotherapy, behavioral rehearsal, discussion, and modeling. Although this training was not a part of the actual study, it was employed as a means to increase the likelihood of obtaining a clinically relevant population by only using subjects in the study who expressed a need for assertion training as well as met the selection criteria on the CRI.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables included the assertion and nonassertion scores from the Conflict Resolution Inventory, as well as several measures of subjects' performance during role playing--assertive content, response

latency, response duration, SUDS score, and pulse rate.

The Conflict Resolution Inventory (McFall & Lillesand, 1971; McFall & Twentyman, 1973) is a 35-item, paper-and-pencil measure of refusal behavior in specific situations that yields both an assertion and a nonassertion score. The CRI was used both as a screening instrument and as an index of the extent to which differences in instructional variations during role playing altered subsequent self-report assessments of refusal behavior.

The Subjective Unit of Disturbance Scale (Wolpe & Lazarus, 1966), a measure of subjectively experienced anxiety rated on a scale from 0 to 100, was used following each scene. Pulse rate served as a physiological measure prior to role playing and following the second and last role playing situation. In each case, pulse was measured for a 15-second interval.

Each scene was scored by two blind and independent judges for assertive (refusal) content on a 5-point scale from unqualified acceptance to unqualified refusal patterned after McFall and Lillesand's (1971) rating system. Response latency was operationalized as the elapsed time from the sound of the bell to the initiation of the subject's response, and response duration consisted of the subject's total talk time in seconds. These variables also were scored by two independent judges.

Results

Pretest Data

The means and standard deviations of the CRI pre-assertion score for the 80 subjects were 10.23 and 3.66. The population from which this sample was drawn had means of 21.06 and 19.06 and standard deviations of 6.48

and 5.65 for males and females respectively. On the pre-nonassertion score, the mean was 19.91 and the standard deviation was 4.03. The means for males and females in the population were 11.57 and 7.89 with standard deviations of 12.13 and 10.66 respectively. An analysis of variance revealed no significant pretest differences among the groups on these two variables.

The pre-pulse mean and standard deviation scores were 20.49 beats per 15 seconds and 4.38 beats per 15 seconds respectively for the 80 subjects. When Pulse One scores were subjected to an analysis of variance, there was a significant two-way interaction between Factor 2 (Criteria) and Factor 3 (Instructions on how to act), $F(1,72) = 6.25, p < .05$. Because of these pretest differences, it was decided to analyze all subsequent pulse data using analysis of covariance with pre-pulse scores as the covariate.

Interrater Reliabilities

The assertive content, response latency, and response duration scores were computed by two judges who rated the taped responses of the subjects. The judges worked independently and were blind to the hypotheses of the study and the group membership of the subjects. Pearson product-moment correlations were employed to compute interrater reliability coefficients. For assertive content, each judge rated all seven scenes for each subject. The coefficients were 0.91, 0.96, 0.93, 0.96, 0.99, 0.97, and 0.97 for each scene respectively.

For response latency and response duration, one judge rated the seven scenes for all subjects while a second judge rated 10% random sample (56

scenes) for each variable. The reliabilities were 0.99 for both response latency and response duration.

Role-play Data

Although the directional prediction concerning more assertive content for subjects having knowledge of the situations tapped (Factor 1) was not supported, $F(1,72) = 0.16$, $p > .05$, significant differences were found for Factor 1 on Pulse Two (when pre-pulse was used as a covariate) and SUDS. Those subjects who were not told the type of situations tapped had a higher pulse rate ($M=20.75$) than those who were told ($M=18.65$), $F(1,71) = 6.03$, $p < .05$. When SUDS was subjected to an analysis of variance, a significant difference was found between groups, $F(1,72) = 5.37$, $p < .05$. The groups given information about the type of situations to be role played had a significantly higher SUDS score ($M=52.40$) than the groups not given this information ($M=45.08$). This inverse relationship between SUDS and pulse rate for this factor was surprising. This finding may be due either to the complex relationship between psychological and physiological measures (Lang, 1971) or to the pretest pulse differences which analysis of covariance may not have been able to adequately control (Cronbach, Note 1).

On the criteria factor, significant group differences were found on response latency and response duration, thereby supporting two of the directional predictions for this factor. Subjects who were told the criteria for effective behavior had significantly, $F(1,72) = 3.79$, $p < .05$, shorter response latencies ($M=2.22$) and significantly, $F(1,72) = 9.08$, $p < .01$, shorter response durations ($M=4.20$) than those who were not

($\bar{M}=2.69$ and $\bar{M}=5.80$). The directional prediction of lower SUDS for subjects who had knowledge of effective behavior was not supported $F(1,72) = 0.45, p > .05$.

For Factor 3 (how to act), there were significant differences on the post-assertion, $F(1,72) = 4.36, p < .05$ and post-nonassertion, $F(1,72) = 5.71, p < .05$ scores. The subjects told to act effectively had significantly higher assertion scores ($\bar{M}=10.93$) and significantly lower nonassertion scores ($\bar{M}=19.50$) on the CRI than the subjects who were told to act normally ($\bar{M}=8.60$ and $\bar{M}=23.33$ respectively).

A significant interaction was found between the knowledge of situations and criteria factors on response duration, $F(1,72) = 6.12, p < .05$. When the criteria for effective behavior were not provided, subjects who lacked knowledge of the situations responded more briefly than subjects who had this knowledge. However, when the criteria for effective behavior were provided, the effect of knowledge of the situations was reversed with those subjects who had this knowledge responding more briefly than those who did not (See Figure 1).

No other interactions were significant. Finally, content was the only variable that was not significantly affected by any of the instructional variations.

insert Figure 1 about here

Discussion

With the exception of the pulse data, which are difficult to explain and perhaps a function of initial uncontrollable pretest differences, the

results indicate that merely providing subjects with explicit information on each of the instructional factors results in improved or more assertive performance on one or more variables. It should be recalled that the subjects were selected based on fairly stringent criteria on the CRI and on their desire for assertion training. Nevertheless, providing information about the type of situations resulted in lower subjectively experienced anxiety scores. Knowledge of the criteria for effective behavior produced shorter response latencies and durations; whereas instructions to act effectively resulted in increased CRI-Assertion and decreased CRI-Nonassertion scores. The only variable not influenced by increased specificity in the assessment instructions was content, and the previously mentioned study by Nietzel and Bernstein (1976) indicates that it also can be affected.

It should be recognized that the differences obtained in this study were not due to some brief form of assertion training, i.e. an abbreviated form of coaching. Rather, they were obtained merely by increasing the specificity of the instructions for the assessment task for the subjects. These findings have implications for screening and treatment, for comparing results across assertion training studies, and for measuring change following training.

Instructing subjects to behave effectively or assertively, discussing the criteria for effective behavior, and providing information concerning the situations tapped by behavioral role playing during screening or pre-testing will result in more effective or assertive behavior than instructions to act normally and instructions which provide no information about

the situations and effective behavior. The former set of instructions appear to maximize what subjects are capable of as compared to the latter set. Subjects who perform poorly when told to perform effectively, etc., would appear to demonstrate deficits in assertion that are more severe or clinically relevant. Conversely, subjects who perform well under instructions to act effectively, etc., either have mild or analogue-level deficits in assertion or are deficient in response performance rather than in response capability. That is, these subjects either do not have severe deficits, or their deficits are not in the ability to perform. Rather, their deficits may be in knowledge of appropriate behavior, evaluation of potential consequences, self-statements, etc. The point is that researchers either may want to exclude these subjects from certain clinical studies or to identify whether these subjects have deficits in the cognitive-motivational areas and then to adjust subsequent treatment and research accordingly.

A second implication of the present findings concerns comparing results across assertion training research programs. As mentioned earlier, the assessment instructions vary markedly across these programs and vary on some of the factors investigated in this study. Our results indicate that different assessment instructions can both lead to the selection of different types of subjects and result in different levels of performance. Clearly care should be taken in making comparisons across studies employing different instructions during assessment.

Finally, the results may have implications for measuring change in assertion training research. Following treatment, treated subjects differ from untreated controls not only by virtue of treatment but also by their

knowledge of what will be assessed during the posttest. They enter the behavioral posttest having received treatment and also with knowledge of the types of situations likely to be encountered, knowledge of the criteria for effective behavior, and an implicit demand to perform effectively or assertively during the role play. Untreated controls, on the other hand, enter the same situation lacking both treatment and knowledge of many of the specifics of the posttest assessment task. The present study has indicated that increasing information about the assessment task can result in improved performance. As such, any differences in outcome research between treated and untreated subjects may be a function of treatment, of knowledge of the assessment task, or both.

The implication of the findings then is that it is important to control for or to partial out the effects of knowledge concerning the assessment task from treatment per se in assertion training research. These effects could be determined by including an assessment control group in future studies. Such a group would not receive training but would be informed about the nature of the assessment situations, etc., prior to the posttest assessment. This assessment control group would permit researchers to equate treated and control subjects more nearly for performance demand level during assessment. In conjunction with a standard no treatment control group, it would permit a determination of the extent to which training led to changes in behavior beyond those which may result from simple knowledge of what is expected during assessment or of the extent to which the obtained differences may have resulted from knowledge of the requirements of the assessment task. To our knowledge, such an assessment control group has yet to be employed in assertion training outcome research.

Reference Notes

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Footnotes

1. John S. Westefeld is now at the Student Counseling Service, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

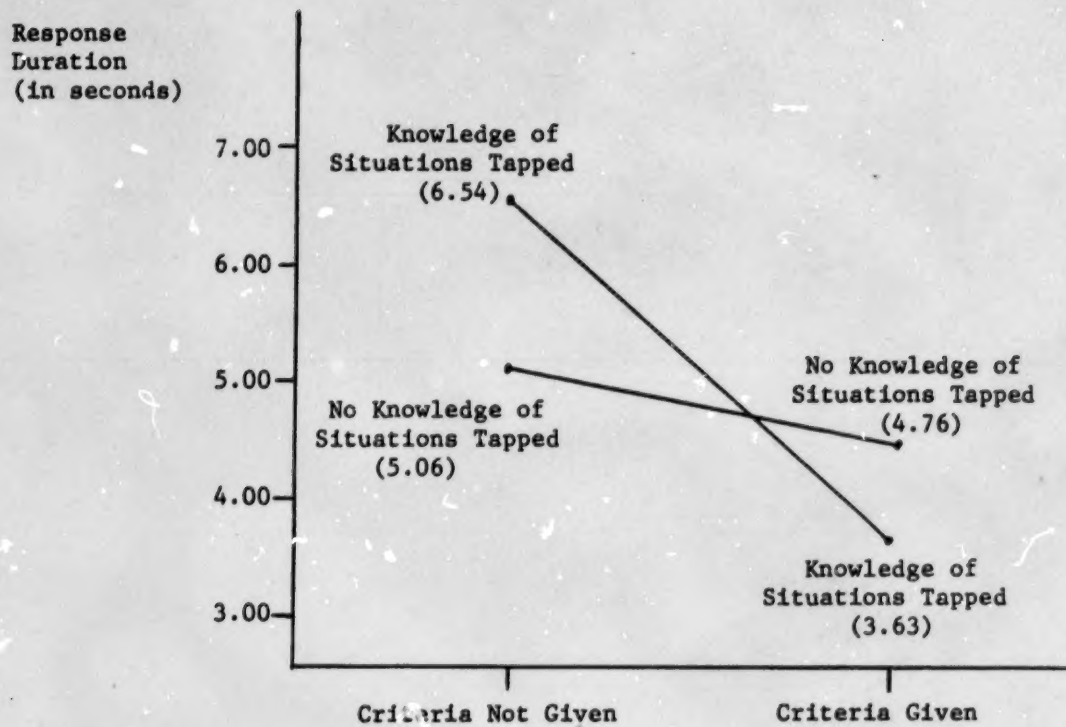


Figure 1. Interaction between the Knowledge of Situations Factor and the Criteria of Effective Behavior Factor on Response Duration